

How to Trace Your Immigrant Ancestors: Getting Started

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Statue of Liberty National Monument
Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration



Finding Family: In the 21st century, it's tempting to think that all you have to do is type your last name into a computer and all the records of your immigrant ancestors will instantly appear. That's only partially true: such a search may yield hundreds or thousands of possible matches, but you have no way of knowing which of them, if any, are your relatives — and you may not be looking in the right database.

Before you search the records, begin by gathering as much information as possible from *sources within your family*. Try to identify the names of particular immigrants, the date and location of their arrival in the United States, their port of departure overseas, and their age at immigration. Ask your relatives what they know and see if they have any old documents that might provide information, such as birth, marriage, or death certificates; steamship tickets; naturalization papers; a family Bible; or photos that can help identify people and narrow down dates. You may even discover that you have a relative who's already done a lot of genealogical research, so that you don't have to start from scratch.

Ship Manifests: Throughout most of U.S. history, the official record of a person's immigration is found in the *manifest*, or passenger list, of the ship in which he or she arrived. The United States began requiring ships to provide copies of their manifests to the Federal Government in 1820. Many earlier passenger lists still exist, but the records before 1820 are not complete. Early manifests provide little information about each passenger.

Most 19th century manifests provide the name of the vessel, the ports of departure and arrival, and the date of arrival in the United States. For each passenger, the list provides the person's name, age, sex, occupation, country of origin, and country of intended settlement. You may also learn if the person was traveling alone or with family, and sometimes the number of bags carried. Births and deaths that occurred during the voyage are also noted.

Beginning in 1893, the lists provide more detailed information for each passenger. The manifest also records the person's marital status, nationality, last residence, and final destination. Passengers were asked whether they had been in the United States before, and if so, when and where. If the passenger was going to join a relative in the U.S.A., that person's name, address, and relationship to the passenger is recorded. If a passenger was detained upon entering the country, the manifest should include notes related to the detention, usually at both the passenger's main listing and on a separate page listing all detainees.

The content of passenger lists expanded over the years in response to U.S. legal and recordkeeping requirements. A person's race began to be listed, for example, in 1903; a physical description and birthplace in 1906; the name and address of the nearest relative back home in 1907; and whether an immigrant could read and write in 1909. By 1924, at the end of Ellis Island's peak years, manifests include at least 31 pieces of information about each alien passenger. After World War II, however, the amount of data on manifests decreases, because the government uses immigrant case files to hold the information instead.

Where you should look for a particular immigrant's manifest depends on the year and port of entry. This document highlights records from the Ellis Island era. For guidance on how to

search for other records, please refer to the additional National Park Service fact sheet entitled “*How to Trace Your Immigrant Ancestors: Digging Deeper.*”

Ellis Island and Port of New York Records, 1892–1957: For Ellis Island records, the *American Family Immigration History Center* (AFIHC) provides searchable access to digital images of all ship manifests. Visitors to Ellis Island may do their research for a small fee at AFIHC’s computers, and the same information can be accessed free of charge online at www.LibertyEllisFoundation.org. (This is the new web address of the records that used to be found at www.EllisIsland.org.)

The AFIHC records include virtually every human being on every ship entering the Port of New York from overseas during the years 1892 through 1957. The manifests thus include many people who did *not* actually set foot on Ellis Island, such as 1st and 2nd class passengers who were inspected on board ship; U.S. citizens; crew members; and a majority of passengers after mid-1924, when the inspection process moved to U.S. consulates in the immigrants’ home countries. Note that the Port of New York includes not only docks in New York City, but also in nearby New Jersey. Flight manifests for aircraft landing in the area from overseas can also be found in AFIHC’s database.

Search Tips: If you don’t immediately find your ancestor’s record, be persistent. Spelling of names can be a major issue, since the shipping company may have written a name differently on the manifest from the spelling you know. (It’s a myth that names were changed at Ellis Island, since the inspectors there worked from manifests the *shipping companies* created!) Poorly legible handwriting on a manifest can also mean a change in spelling when a modern reader had to enter the name into a database. So don’t give up until you try many different possible spellings. Alternatively, if you know the name of an immigrant’s ship, you can search the database by ship and then review line-by-line each of that vessel’s manifests near the person’s estimated arrival date.

If you’ve run out of search options in the AFIHC database, try one of the other websites that contain immigration records. These sources may have spelled an immigrant’s name differently when the manifest was indexed, or they may have a clearer image of a particular page. Some genealogy sites make available the results of other people’s research, such as family trees, where you can check to see if someone else has already found the information you seek and posted it online. Please refer to the fact sheet “*How to Trace Your Immigrant Ancestors: Digging Deeper*” for a list of additional websites and other resources.

Note that Ellis Island’s *American Immigrant Wall of Honor* is *not* a list of all the immigrants who came through the island. The wall is a way to honor *any* immigrant in U.S. history by making a donation to the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation to have the person’s name inscribed. For further information on the wall and a list of those honored, visit www.LibertyEllisFoundation.org.

Next Steps: While the advice above will get you started, there are many additional resources available to help you research your family’s immigration history. The National Park Service fact sheet called “*How to Trace Your Immigrant Ancestors: Digging Deeper*” will provide you with further information.